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ABSTRACT

Instructional consultation is a school intervention strategy designed to improve the decision-making and performance capabilities of teachers and to modify the traditional colleague network in schools. The strategy is organized around four interrelated stages: entry, systematic observation, feedback, and training. This paper describes the components, characteristics, and behavioral science foundations of instructional consultation. Special attention is given to the intervention sequence underlying the strategy and to the use of the basic teacher consultant relationship for building staff teams to increase the amount and quality of peer sharing among teachers. (Author)

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INSTRUCTIONAL CONSULTATION: A STRATEGY FOR CLASSROOM INTERVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Instructional consultation is a school intervention strategy designed to improve the decision-making and performance capabilities of teachers and to modify the traditional colleague network in schools. The strategy is organized around four interrelated stages designated as: (a) entry, (b) systematic observation, (c) feedback, and (d) training. The present paper describes the components, characteristics, and behavioral science foundations of instructional consultation. Special attention is given to the intervention sequence underlying the strategy and to the use of the basic consultant-teacher relationship for building staff teams to increase the amount and quality of peer sharing among teachers. The total consultation system provides a comprehensive tool for integrating concepts and techniques and constructing individualized intervention strategies.

INSTRUCTIONAL CONSULTATION: A STRATEGY FOR CLASSROOM INTERVENTION

Interest in improving the quality of education has generated a number of efforts to design and implement behavioral science intervention systems in school settings (see Chesler, 1971; Schmuck & Miles, 1971). School interventions, reflecting the complexity of the educational enterprise, have concentrated on several change targets ranging from organizational norms and interpersonal relationships to teacher attitudes, knowledge, and practices. In addition, a variety of intervention strategies, e.g., information dispensing, laboratory training, survey feedback, and team formation, have been used to effect changes in schools and teachers.

The literature on school interventions has brought into focus two persistent problem areas: (a) the need to design effective methodologies for changing teaching practices, and (b) the necessity to develop procedures for increasing the amount and quality of colleague interaction among teachers. Change strategies oriented to teaching practices represent interventions at the technical level of organizational functioning (Parsons, 1958). Insofar as colleague interaction concerns classroom practices, such interaction becomes a valuable resource for establishing and maintaining high levels of technical effectiveness in teaching.

The importance of interventions at the technical level of school operation derives from the centrality of the formal learning environment in the students' educational experience. Schools exist to facilitate learning in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Moreover, in most present educational situations students spend up to 90 per cent of the school day in some type of formal learning context. Changes, whether structural or personal, at the institutional or managerial levels of school organization do not automatically result in equivalent changes in teaching practices at the classroom level (see Chesler, 1971). If the quality of student learning experiences are to be improved, direct interventions into the formal learning situation are required. This is not to say that changes at other levels of organizational functioning are superfluous; such changes obviously interact with changes in teaching practices. The point is, rather, that organizational changes are not necessarily sufficient conditions for improving the quality of experiences students encounter in the classroom.

Instructional consultation is an intervention strategy directed to the technical level of school operation. The system contributes especially to the modification of teaching practices and the colleague network among teachers. The present paper contains a description of the components

and behavioral science foundations of instructional consultation as well as a rationale for this particular approach to school intervention.

The Nature of Instructional Consultation

Instructional consultation incorporates a complex of services designed to improve teachers' decision-making and performance capabilities as manifested in the concrete teaching-learning environment. During initial contacts instructional consultation operates within a one-to-one relationship between consultant and teacher. This consultant-teacher relationship, however, provides a foundation for building staff teams among teachers. Instructional consultation therefore also furnishes a means for improving the amount and quality of colleague interaction concerning teaching practices.[1]

Components of Instructional Consultation

The components of the instructional consultation system represent processes which facilitate: (a) teacher awareness of salient behavior dynamics in learning environments; (b) teacher decision-making concerning the effectiveness of his influence attempts in promoting student learning; (c) teacher acquisition of behavior sequences which increase his teaching effectiveness; and (d) teacher performance of these behavior patterns in the classroom.[2]

The total instructional consultation act can be

described in terms of a four-stage cycle:

First stage - Entry: Consists of a consultant-teacher conference designed to clarify the nature and scope of the intervention, aid the teacher in specifying an area of concern toward which consultation services can be directed, and establish the relational climate necessary for the success of the intervention.

Second stage - Systematic Observation: Encompasses the observation, recording, and analysis of actual classroom events selected by the teacher for attention. A variety of standardized and idiographic observation and recording instruments and analysis procedures are used to generate representative, objective data about behavior events and processes in the classroom.

Third stage - Feedback: Refers to the focused feedback of observational data in a manner which facilitates teacher awareness of existing behavior patterns in the classroom. In feedback the teacher's analysis and understanding of the data

are central; the consultant serves as a mirror so that the teacher can test the reality of his own classroom performance. Once teacher awareness of existing conditions is established, the consultant can introduce, if necessary, data about alternative teaching practices.

Fourth stage - A. Closure: Pertains to a technique used by the consultant in those instances in which feedback is a sufficient condition for teacher change, intent-action congruence is achieved in feedback, or the teacher does not perceive a need to modify or extend existing skill capabilities.

B. Training: Designates strategies designed to enable the teacher to actualize desired teaching changes in the classroom. Included in training are formal techniques to assist the teacher in modifying existing behaviors and/or acquiring new teaching skills. Skill training is initiated only when the teacher has arrived at a clear perception of the relevance of skill

acquisition to the on-going classroom process.

Taken together, the four stages of instructional consultation are designed to provide two interrelated services: (a) awareness training and (b) behavior training. Awareness training enables the teacher to attend to salient aspects of the interactive classroom environment, relate existing classroom events to theory and research on the teaching-learning process, and plan teaching patterns contingent upon student progress at a particular stage of learning. Behavior training enables the teacher to acquire the performance capabilities necessary to employ a full range of learner-contingent teaching practices in the classroom. The observation and feedback stages of instructional consultation focus primarily on awareness training outcomes; the training stage serves to facilitate the major behavior modification outcomes of the system.

Characteristics of Instructional Consultation

The effectiveness of an intervention strategy would seem to depend upon the degree to which the strategy accounts for factors operating in the target environment. Recent research (see Clear, 1970) suggests that teachers strongly resist classroom interventions of a supervisory nature. Instructional consultation, however, has several characteristics which clearly distinguish the system from

conventional supervisory models.[3] The following discussion considers some of these characteristics which increase the possibility of instructional consultation effectiveness.

The consultation process. From a systems framework, the behavioral processes in instructional consultation can be differentiated into "instrumental" and "relational" conduct (Howard & Orlinsky, 1972, p. 617). Instrumental conduct refers to such variables as the content of teacher verbal and nonverbal communication and the specific change strategies of the consultant. Relational conduct refers to the dimensions of consultant and teacher communications which influence the affective climate of the consultation environment. A useful perspective on these behavioral processes can be derived from Schein's (1969) process consultation model and from conceptions of the components of the helping relationship (Combs, Avila, & Purkey, 1971). These conceptualizations place primary emphasis on: (a) problem definition and solution by the client utilizing process data and skill training provided by the consultant, and (b) the importance of establishing a relational climate characterized by high levels of understanding, acceptance, and empathy. From this framework, the instructional consultant is seen not as an 'expert' solving the teacher's problems but rather as an agent who develops teacher observation, analysis, and decision-making skills within an interpersonal

environment conducive to professional self-awareness and self-direction.

Non-evaluative thrust. In keeping with the process consultation orientation, instructional consultation focuses on creating a non-evaluative intervention atmosphere. This non-evaluative thurst is especially important in determining the character of observational data used in feedback. Evaluative data in feedback inhibits interpersonal communication (Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1952), diverts teacher attention from the reality-testing process (MacDonald, 1966), and lacks sufficient descriptive detail concerning behavior events in the classroom (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971). Since the purpose of feedback is to foster teacher exploration of existing and alternative teaching practices, evaluative data are clearly inappropriate. Descriptive data, on the other hand, are useful in establishing both the instrumental and relational conditions which promote teacher awareness and motivate teacher change.

The non-evaluative emphasis in instructional consultation also requires that the consultant refrain from becoming a validator of teaching method. Rather, the teacher himself assesses the contribution of a particular teaching practice to the achievement of intended effects in the classroom. The consultant assist the teacher in validating effectiveness by providing behavioral data about the actual effects

resulting from the implementation of a particular teaching practice.

The instructional consultation sequence. The sequence of an instructional consultation intervention moves from entry through observation and feedback to training. The number of times one or more stages are repeated in a sequence depends upon the teacher's decision to advance to the next stage. In other words, the entry stage may be repeated several times before the teacher decides to request observation and feedback. Similarly, several observation and feedback cycles may occur before the teacher asks for training. The total number of stages in a given sequence also depends upon the teacher. A sequence ends whenever a request is met or a problem revolved to the satisfaction of the teacher. A particular intervention sequence may therefore contain only one stage or as many as all four stages. In this manner the teacher himself manages consultation resources by determining the pace and terminal point for an intervention sequence.

The purpose of the instructional consultation sequence is to make each intervention relevant to the performance level of the teacher and to provide continuity for teacher behavior change. It is quite possible to give a group a teachers laboratory skill training to increase their performance capabilities without first completing an observa-

tion and feedback cycle. Under such circumstances, however, some of the teachers may well have acquired the target skills prior to training. Moreover, utilization of these skills in the classroom depends upon the extent to which such skills happen to contribute to the teacher's goal accomplishment. In either case, the effects of laboratory skill training could be negligible and therefore the time devoted to training would be largely wasted. In the instructional consultation sequence, teacher awareness of the need for a particular skill is a prerequisite for training in the use of that skill. This sequence would seem to increase substantially the possibility that skill training will produce meaningful changes in teaching practices.

Behavioral Science Foundations

Each stage in the cycle of instructional consultation represents a technical domain or skill cluster for classroom intervention. These technical domains derive substance from several areas of theory and research in the behavioral sciences. The total consultation system provides a comprehensive tool with which to integrate concepts and techniques, construct new strategies, and derive decision rules for applying specific strategies at various points in the intervention process.

Systematic observation. The technical domain of systematic observation incorporates a wide array of approaches and

systems (see reviews by Medley & Mitzel, 1963; and Weick, 1968). In addition, research and theory on person perception (Tagiuri, 1968) and clinical inference (Sarbin, Taft, & Bailey, 1960) processes offer a perspective on the observation and analysis tasks of the consultant. Such material provides a source for standardized observation instruments as well as a conceptual framework for constructing individualized observation strategies relevant to specific teacher requests for feedback.

Research on classroom processes (Biddle, 1967) has generated several observation and analysis systems especially applicable to instructional consultation. In addition to providing formal instruments, classroom observation research is a source of multiple behavior languages for describing teaching-learning events (e.g., logical processes, pedagogical moves, nonverbal communication). Such languages furnish a basis for communicating about teaching and thereby increase the teacher's ability to identify and delineate targets for instructional consultation. This ability to communicate about teaching also facilitates effective sharing of teaching practices. In this way, the observation and feedback stages of instructional consultation establish a foundation for initiating and maintaining meaningful colleague interaction.

Feedback. Feedback in instructional consultation can be

viewed as a process of facilitating teacher reality-testing, i.e., of bringing the teacher into contact with the reality of his classroom performance and helping him to incorporate these data into his perceptual field (see Clark & Beatty, 1967). Useful conceptualizations of the perceptual dynamics involved in reality-testing can be derived from the "lens" model of Brunswik (1952) and from the self-concept theory of Combs and Snygg (1959). In addition, experimental behavioral cybernetics theory and research (Smith & Smith, 1966) call attention to the sensitive natural feedback mechanisms which operate in human performance. Instructional consultation strategies must take into account the impact of feedback on these complex mechanisms of behavior maintenance and change.

Considerable research evidence is available which indicates that data feedback is an effective technique for increasing teacher awareness of classroom dynamics and for stimulating teacher behavior change (Amidon & Hough, 1967; Flanders, 1970). As noted earlier, behavior change is not a necessary outcome of every feedback session. In those instances, however, in which teacher change does ensue, cognitive dissonance theory appears to account for at least one of the underlying processes activated by data feedback (Tuckman, McCall, & Hyman, 1969). The magnitude of this dissonance is a function of the discrepancy between the teacher's perception of his classroom practices and the

actual behavior patterns recorded during systematic observation. The existence of a supportive relational climate is essential for helping the teacher to achieve a productive resolution of such dissonance.

Videotape recording is frequently recommended as a valuable tool for feedback to teachers. Research findings suggest, however, that videotape feedback effects are minimal unless playback is conducted under conditions which focus teacher attention on salient dimensions of the recorded performance (see Baker, 1970; Stoller, 1966). Providing appropriate focusing and prompting conditions is a central aspect of the consultant's feedback task.

Training. Although feedback can effect teacher behavior change, the degree of actual change in a specified direction is a function of the extent to which: (a) the teacher is cognizant of alternative teaching practices, (b) the teacher already possesses the capability to perform the desired pattern, and/or (c) the classroom contingencies affecting teacher performance allow the teacher to implement the new pattern in that setting. In situations in which these conditions are not met, the consultant needs to furnish a support system to help the teacher actualize desired changes in the classroom. The domain of training incorporates services which enable a teacher to translate new insights and knowledge concerning the teaching-learning process into action

sequences consistent with classroom goals.[4]

Training strategies range from providing information about effective teaching practices to initiating formal training procedures in either a laboratory setting or the teacher's classroom. In those instances in which feedback motivates the teacher to change in directions requiring the acquisition of substantially new performance capabilities, laboratory skill training is appropriate. Theories of observational learning from models or demonstrations (Bandura, 1965; Sheffield, 1961) and systems, such as microteaching (Allen & Ryan, 1969), based on these theories are directing applicable to the design of laboratory training strategies in instructional consultation. In addition to laboratory training, the consultant can employ techniques within the teacher's classroom which facilitate skill acquisition. The teacher, for example, might use a hand counter or record sheet to monitor his own classroom performance, or the consultant might use card signals to cue or prompt the teacher to perform designated patterns (see Hall, et al., 1971). Finally, the consultant can provide further observation and feedback services to aid the teacher in ascertaining the extent to which classroom performance approximates a desired teaching strategy.

Building Staff Teams Among Teachers

Instructional consultation rests on the premise that

the adoption of new teaching practices depends upon the degree to which teachers: (a) are aware of their current classroom practices, (b) have knowledge of alternatives, (c) possess the ability to perform these alternatives in the classroom, and (d) receive support for adopting new practices. The observation, feedback, and training stages of instructional consultation are designed to supply these four conditions for teacher change. If, however, instructional consultation is to be more than a one-shot change effort, the development of staff teams among teachers is essential to establishing and maintaining these conditions in the school setting.

Barriers to Peer Sharing

A number of recent attempts have been made to create opportunities for increased teacher sharing of classroom practices (see Brenner, 1971; Chesler & Barakat, 1967; Fox & Lippitt, 1967). Reports of these attempts indicate that an increase in the amount and quality of peer sharing does result in the adoption of more innovative classroom practices by the teachers involved. In other words, peer sharing is a source of innovative practices and a support system which encourages the adoption of these practices in the classroom. The reports also suggest, however, that these attempts to motivate and sustain peer sharing have been only moderately successful in accomplishing their objective. As soon as the

intervention period is over, teachers return to conventional communication patterns which seldom include the sharing of teaching practices.

Efforts to establish and maintain peer sharing of teaching practices must account for the many factors within the profession which tend to militate against this type of colleague interaction among teachers. In a series of reports on the organizational characteristics of teaching, Lortie (1964, 1969, 1971) has isolated a number of barriers to sharing and described the structural features of the occupation which sustain these barriers. Lortie's central argument is that "the structure of the occupation . . . presses teachers toward individualism and conservatism . . . [which], in turn, inhibit the development of collegial involvement in improving the general capacity of teachers to render more effective service" (1971, p. 51). Although this individualistic attitude is fostered by recruitment and preservice socialization practices, it is sustained at the inservice level by the structural isolation of the individual teacher and the "autonomy-equality" pattern among teachers (Lortie, 1964) and by the reward system in the school setting (Lortie, 1969).

Individualism in teaching is especially apparent in teacher attitudes toward methodology. Lortie notes that teachers tend to hold an intuitive rather than an analytical

view of teaching practice. Such a mentality combined with the individualistic orientation among teachers leads to the notion that "to teach well is to work with one's peculiar self, not to share in a generally valid body of practical and scientific knowledge" (Lortie, 1971, p. 57). From this point of view, peer sharing has limited functional value for the individual teacher. If a teacher's practices are totally a function of his own personality, then there is little to be gained from the sharing of teaching practices with colleagues. Peer sharing interventions which fail to change this fundamental teacher attitude can hardly be expected to improve substantially the amount and quality of colleague interaction about teaching. Given the importance of organizational factors in fostering and sustaining this attitude, peer sharing strategies must also concentrate on modifying the basic structure of the colleague network in schools.

Team Building in Instructional Consultation

Peer sharing systems typically involve the exclusive use of group intervention strategies (e.g., Brenner, 1971). In contrast, the instructional consultation approach to increasing peer sharing focuses on building staff teams through an individual-to-group intervention sequence. The basic steps in this sequence can be summarized as follows:

Phase 1: The consultant establishes one-to-one relationships with several teachers in a school.

At this stage, all observation, feedback, and training services are provided individually to each teacher.

Phase 2: The consultant seeks to create volunteer staff teams among those teachers who share common interests and styles. Once linkages have been established, each team member begins to receive feedback in a group setting and to share observation and training decisions with other team members.

Phase 3: The consultant reduces direct intervention with individual team members as the team itself becomes a resource for consultation services. The consultant remains available to the team on request and continues to work with teachers who are not members of team units.

In this fashion the consultant-teacher relationship can become the basis for building self-directing, task-oriented staff teams among teachers. This process can be repeated to create new teams or restructure existing units.

The internal operation of individual teams will depend upon the specific purposes which gave rise to the formation of the team. The important factor is that the teams emerged from the expressed needs and interests of the team members

and that the decision to enter or leave a team remain voluntary. Teams established in this manner will obviously cut across conventional demarcation lines, such as departmental structures and grade levels, to form temporary systems within the school organization. Miles (1964) notes that temporary systems provide the type of supportive climate which promotes self-awareness, inventiveness, problem-solving effectiveness, and change. Within such a climate, peer sharing can have a significant impact on teaching practices.

The instructional consultation strategy for establishing and maintaining staff teams would seem to account for the attitudinal and structural barriers to peer sharing. The one-to-one relationship provides a supportive environment in which the teacher can learn to analyze his teaching performance and to benefit from interacting with another concerning his classroom practices. The relationship therefore builds teacher readiness for the analytical and interpersonal mode of communicating about teaching required for peer sharing.[5] Once readiness is established, teams are then formed according to the expressed interests of members, and the consultant works to make the team itself a resource for consultation services. The resulting teams not only become a source of ideas and support, but also assume technical functions of helping members increase awareness and acquire new teaching skills. Teams of this nature

would seem to have sufficient strength to modify the traditional colleague structure among teacher and to remove teaching practice from the isolation of the individual classroom.

Concluding Remarks

Instructional consultation is an intervention strategy oriented to the technical level of school operation. The system integrates a variety of concepts and techniques derived from the behavioral sciences and applies them directly to the task of improving the decision-making and performance capabilities of teachers and to modifying the traditional colleague network in schools. In view of the specific nature of instructional consultation, the present discussion has focused primarily on the classroom as an intervention target. This emphasis on the classroom is not intended to suggest that this domain is the only legitimate target for school intervention. A number of other intervention targets in schools warrant attention and several strategies have been used to deal successfully with these areas (see Schmuck & Miles, 1971). Instructional consultation is quite compatible with these other school intervention strategies. Indeed, instructional consultation would appear to complement other strategies by focusing on targets which too often resist change.

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Footnotes

[1]Instructional consultation, in other words, incorporates both individual and group strategies of intervention (see Hornstein, Bunker, & Hornstein, 1971). The rationale for the instructional consultation sequence (individual to group) is considered at a later point in the present discussion.

[2]Throughout the present discussion, the term "classroom" is used to refer to any formally structured learning environment. This particular use of the term does not necessarily imply a commitment to the conventional classroom setting.

[3]For a perspective on conventional supervision models, see Willower, Cistone, & Packard (1972).

[4]Chesler (1971, pp. 619-620) observes that translating "increased knowledge or new intentions . . . into behavioral implications relevant for the classroom is a highly developed skill, and most teachers do not have it."

[5]The importance of the analytical mode of communicating is supported by Brenner's (1971) finding that peer sharing sessions which provide more knowledge about innovations produce a greater number of attempts to adopt the practices.